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Claims Conference
Conference on Jewish Material Claims
Against Germany

Claims Conference Holocaust Survivor Memoir Collection

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THE OLD WOMAN

Rena Berliner

The old woman was tall and slim. Her gray hair tied neatly in a bun in the back of her neck.

She met us at the door, asked us to enter, and told us to sit down in what she called her parlor. Mother I had just come from Warsaw where we had stayed at the home of a friend of the old lady, a Mrs. Gruzinska.

After our escape from the Lwow ghetto we lived at Mrs. Gruzinska 's for a few weeks. She charged us enormous amounts of money for the shelter and upkeep. After a short time, our money started to diminish rapidly. We asked Mrs. Gruzinska to recommend someone who would take us in and charge less.

Our landlady was a good woman, a little greedy, but friendly and warm. She arranged for us to stay with a friend of hers who lived in a small village near Warsaw. The old lady lived in a villa situated on a large plot of land on the outskirts of the village. She was a widow, 72 years old.

After we sat down, she held a lengthy speech telling us first that she really didn't like Jews and never had. She said that she was taking us in strictly for the money, to help her daughter who was living in Warsaw.

We were told to be very quiet and stay in a room she gave us. Mother, she said, should help her to clean the house and with some other chores. This is why, she explained, she was going to charges less than she did the family who she was hiding upstairs. She told us not to communicate with them and avoid telling about our arrangements with her.

The family who lived upstairs was a doctor, a surgeon from Warsaw, his wife and their 2 year-old baby who was trained by his parents never to cry or utter a sound.

Mother told her that she would have to travel to Warsaw almost every week to get some food and sell the scarves and gloves we were knitting from old wool unraveled from sweaters we brought from home.

As time went by, the old lady started to like my mother and often told her that she was not like other Jews and asked her if it was possible that one of her parents was Christian. Mother humored her, saying that she was unsure.

There were very few books in the House, mostly the classics. Mrs. Takasiewicz, for this was her name, used to spend her days tending her garden where she grew vegetables, going to the local market, and in the evening, doing some embroidery. Mother then sat with her because she liked to tell her stories about her husband and how he came from a noble family. She told Mom that her daughter was a spinster schoolteacher who lived in Warsaw.

The amazing thing is that we never knew the old lady's first name and never met her daughter. The old lady was a loner and I don't remember anyone ever visiting her, not her neighbors, and none of her family.

Mrs. Takasiewicz didn't like me and the feeling was mutual. She seldom spoke with me and I spent most of my days reading and rereading the few books she had. Sometimes when the old lady was not around we used to visit the people upstairs. Mrs. Takasiewicz was very frugal and ate sparingly. She had a closet she kept locked up where she stored some foodstuffs and goodies. She never offered any of them to us, not even to my mother whom she liked. She was greedy. The money she collected from us she kept in a body belt.

A few months passed and our money was running out. We were desperate, knowing that without paying our monthly rent, Mrs. Takasiewicz would, without hesitation, throw us out.

We decided for mother to go to Warsaw and tell Mrs. Gruzinska about our predicament. Mrs. Gruzinska was a good woman, compassionate and like Mom very much. She thought for a while and then told Mom that she would try to do something about it. She asked Mother to come back to Warsaw on a certain day.

When Mother came back next week, she met at Mrs. Gruzinska's a pretty young woman who told her that she would get for us money from a secret organization, to pay our landlady. She asked for the amount, and every month from then on she used to hand Mom an envelope with money to pay Mrs. Mrs. Takasiewicz. The old woman knew nothing about it and life at the Villa went on as before.

In September 1944 the Russian army commenced their offensive into the territory of western Poland. The war for Warsaw was fierce. The Germans wouldn't surrender for weeks and we found ourselves in the line of fire.

The people of the village were evacuated. Only a few remained. One of them, Mrs. Takasiewicz, who had her Jews and was saying that she was not afraid of anything. She laughed at the people who left, saying that when they would come back their houses would be robbed and probably destroyed by vandals.

While we were at Mrs. Takasiewicz, a young man who was a friend of the people upstairs, came one day and begged to stay with them. He escaped from the Warsaw ghetto and was wandering from town to town. Finally, he came to the friends he knew during the occupation. They accepted him but he hid from Mrs. Takasiewicz, who never found out that someone else lived upstairs.

Our villa was constantly occupied by either German or Hungarian soldiers. To escape them we dug a dungeon below the cellar. We spread old linens on the floor and stayed there most of the time.

We would get out when they were not around. Mrs. Takasiewicz would give us a signal when it was safe. Mrs. Takasiewicz never hid with us. We'd begged her to do it when the shelling was fierce, but she refused, saying that she was not afraid. It was simply beneath her dignity to hide in a very tight space with Jews.

One morning the shelling was very strong. We hid, as usual, in the sub basement. We asked Mrs. Takasiewicz to join us but again she refused, saying that she was not afraid.

Suddenly, we heard a piercing scream coming from the front room. We rushed out from our hiding place and found Mrs.

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Takasiewicz lying on the floor in a pool of blood. The window was shattered and pieces of shrapnel were lying everywhere.

The doctor picked Mrs. Takasiewicz up and put her on the kitchen table. The blood was gushing in a steady stream from her carotid artery. He applied pressure and stood over her for over an hour, but to no avail. The blood was leaving the poor woman's body and her life was ebbing away.

We carried her to her bed and applied towels to her neck. She complained that she was cold, so we covered her with all the blankets we could find. She knew she was dying. It took several hours for the death to come.

Mother sat next to her on the bed holding her hand. Just before she drew her last breath, she pointed to mother to take the money belt, which was lying next to her on the bed. It contained all the money she had collected from the Jews. She asked Mother to give it to her daughter and a few minutes later she died. The only people who were present at her death ~~with~~ ^{WERE} the Jews she disliked so much.

Mother was the only one who cried. She had become fond of the old lady.

We all wondered what was going to become of us now that we were alone. We had no food except a few meager provisions the old lady kept and some apples from Mrs. Takasiewicz's garden.

There were Hungarian soldiers in and out of the house and we decided that mother would pretend to be the sister of the owner of the house who had been killed and I her daughter. They had no idea of who was a Jew and who not. The people from upstairs stayed there.

Mother asked the soldiers to bury Mrs. Takasiewicz. Somehow, a very simple casket was put together made of a few boards and Mrs. Takasiewicz was buried in her garden that she loved so much.

There was no priest, nobody to eulogize her and no people except the Hungarian soldiers, mother and I. Poor Mrs. Takasiewicz! The old lady died alone among people whose

lives she saved but whom she really disliked and even despised.

When we went back into the house what struck me was the smell in the room where the shrapnel fell. It was a smell of dust, something strange I cannot find words for, and the smell of death.

The fight over Warsaw continued for few more weeks. The Hungarian soldiers were in and out of the house. They even fell in love with me and wanted to give me all kinds of gifts. Seeing that it was getting too dangerous, I started hiding from them and Mama told them that I had gone to visit our aunt and would stay there until the end of the war.

In the beginning of November 1944 we were liberated by the Russian army. We were told by an officer who was Jewish and to whom we disclosed our identity, to still pretend we were Poles, because the soldiers were anti-Semites.

Now it was the Russians who lived in the house. They gave us food and one of the officers fell madly in love with me. He was very respectful and never attempted any intimacy but asked me to sew a small sack for his tobacco and was sure that the sack would save his life in the war.

We stayed in the house a few more weeks but then decided to leave. We wandered from town to town in the territories that were already liberated by the Soviet armies.

We finally came to the City of Lublin, where a Jewish community of survivors was forming and we registered with the Jewish Committee.

After the war ended, we traveled to Warsaw. We started to look for Mrs. Takasiewicz 's daughter and advertised in a few newspapers. Warsaw was in ruins and our efforts were fruitless. After the Russians came, the money Mrs. Takasiewicz gave mother was immediately devalued and became scraps of paper that mother carried around four months until we left for Germany. I regret very much that we never found her and couldn't tell her how her mother died. We never found Mrs. Gruzinska, whom we owed a lot, perhaps even our lives.

It is 56 years from the time it happened and I am the only one alive who remembers the last months of the life and death of an old lady who in spite of herself saved the lives of six Jews and became our savior.

